

The Medina Journal

Summer 2010



Public Square, Medina ~ April 15, 1870

The Phoenix rises from the ashes

On the night of April 14, 1870, the unthinkable happened.

According to the *1881 History of Medina and Ohio*, "the alarm sounded... calling people unceremoniously from their virtuous couches and in a few short hours, almost the entire business district of Medina was in ashes, much of it for the second time."

Despite the 1848 fire which had caused great financial loss – the village still had not created a fire department. At about

3:00 A.M., A.W. Horton mounted a horse and galloped off to Seville to borrow their hand engine and to rouse volunteers. In the meantime, the townspeople resorted to a bucket brigade to fight the fire.

When the fire burned itself out the next morning, practically the entire business district around Public Square was destroyed -- 45 buildings including barns and stables. The photograph above shows the southwest corner of the square and the

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charred remains of H.G. Blake's three-story brick building. The square black object in the middle of the street is a safe. Blake had started a bank in the back room of his Phoenix store in 1857, and the safe was the only item to survive the fire.

The following morning, business owners absorbed the shock and regrouped. Fortunately, this time, many did have insurance and they immediately began to rebuild. The *1881 History* goes on to say, "So far as adding to the beauty of the town, the great fire, like that of Chicago, was beneficial, inasmuch as it was the means of building up a much better class of buildings than are generally found in a town the size of Medina." Within a decade, Public Square was filled with handsome Victorian buildings, some featuring ornate brickwork and ornamental cornices. No two buildings were exactly alike, but all were of a uniform architectural style.

Gloria Brown



This view is from the south side of the square with H.G. Blake's new Phoenix Block at the far right. It housed the Phoenix Bank (now substantially expanded from the safe in the back room of his store), a drugstore, law offices and a large public auditorium on the third floor. It took the outbreak of a third fire – a small one in 1877 – to finally convince the townspeople to create a fire department. In the meantime, the elegant Victorian buildings have survived intact, and, thanks to a nationally-lauded restoration in the 1960's and early 1970's, continue to make Medina's Public Square a showplace of Victorian architecture.



Southwest corner of Public Square today, showing H.G. Blake's Old Phoenix Bank (now FirstMerit). Public Square is the setting for various community festivities throughout the year, including the annual 4th of July Parade seen above.

By the late 1960's Public Square had become an eyesore, although the change occurred so gradually that few people noticed. The Victorian buildings were covered with garish neon signs and the streetscape was cluttered with overhead wires and masses of traffic signs. There had been a move to tear down the 1841 courthouse and talk of paving over part of the Square to create more parking. Merchants complained about the loss of business to nearby shopping centers and malls. The beautiful Square that had risen like a phoenix from the ashes of the 1870 fire was suddenly in danger again.



Profile: P.M. Jones

P.M. Jones was in the audience that January evening in 1967 when F. Eugene Smith of Akron presented a slide show to the American Association of University Women and their guests. He looked at the photographs of urban blight and listened to Smith's indictment of the ugliness of downtown areas in general, of Medina's in particular. And he was moved to action.

After the presentation, he joined a small group of likewise affected citizens in a private home, and the Community Design Committee was created.

The nucleus of the group included two artists, Ken Lipstreu and Elmer Zarney; an antique dealer specializing in the Victorian

era, Ross Trump; a community activist, Elaine Lamb; an attorney, Charles Griesinger; and three businessmen – Bill Boyle, Tom Fitzgerald and P.M. Jones. "A picture is worth a thousand words" became their operative philosophy.

Armed with "pictures" -- carefully researched, colorful renderings created by Lipstreu and Zarney, P.M. Jones found that words were still necessary -- thousands and thousands of words, in fact, as he made the rounds of community groups to make his pitch.

"I talked to anyone who would listen," Jones says. "Sometimes the audience would consist of only 18 people, sometimes 200. It didn't matter."

And what was his message? "That it was 95% aesthetics, caring and paint," P.M. Jones explains. "Take down the ugly neon signs. Care what your building looks like. Paint the building. In many cases it took no more than that."

Property owners discovered wonderful surprises when they followed his advice. Longacre's on the west side of the Square

found a Tiffany-like, art glass window behind their signage, and the huge, fifties-style sign in front of the former Ziegler's Department Store (now Towne Square Commons) concealed beautifully shaped windows with detailed cornices.

But there was one major structure on the square that required considerably more resources to restore – the historic and iconic Old Phoenix National Bank (now FirstMerit). And, worst of all, the board had already acquired property and was prepared to move the bank off the Square. Once they left, the Square might well become a commercial wasteland.

This proposed move struck close to home for P.M. Jones. Both his father and grandfather had served as presidents of the Old Phoenix, and his brother, David B. Jones was currently a vice-president. (David Jones later became president.) Something had to be done.

Discussions were held. Ken Lipstreu created a three dimensional rendering of a beautifully restored Old Phoenix Bank and presented it to the board. And ultimately, the board reversed its decision. They would stay on the Square. And they committed themselves to CDC's vision by investing a substantial amount of money into a restoration effort which closed the main branch for over a year. The end result was a masterful restoration that won an award from the Akron Chapter of the American Institute of Architects (AIA) and inspired the rest of the property owners on the Square to do their part.

P.M. Jones went on to found the Western Reserve Bank (named in honor of his alma mater, Western Reserve Academy), currently the second largest bank in the county. But thinking about those heady days of the late 1960's and early 1970's when a small group of determined citizens accomplished the impossible still fills him with nostalgic pleasure. He flips through a dog-eared folder filled with yellowed sheets of paper – all those early speeches he gave countless times all over Medina. He holds up one pile of sheets.

"I gave this speech so many times," he observes, "That my hands finally stopped shaking when I turned the pages."



**P.M. Jones,
Chairman of the Board of Western
Reserve Bank and founding member
of the Community Design Committee.**

Gloria Brown

Safeguarding the Legacy

Since our last newsletter, the CDC has become aware of a new challenge regarding an old issue: the maintenance and preservation of Medina's historic White Way lampposts. A few months ago, while a city crew member worked on a lamppost on South Court Street, it fell completely over. This prompted the city to hire a professional to inspect a representative sampling of the poles for structural integrity. The results were less than positive. Access plates were rusted, as were the anchor bolts on some poles. The insides of eight poles had rusted away to a point where a screwdriver could be pushed through the metal. Those eight poles have been removed and the city is considering what to do next.



The city has requested the assistance of CDC in developing alternatives to consider regarding the repair or replacement of the poles. CDC has worked with the city on these issues before. In 1985 we were consulted when the city did renovation work on the poles and, ten years later, when the city undertook a major streetscape renovation of Public Square, we once again provided input and assistance.

As we go to press, the CDC is seeking input from Union Metal regarding possible replacement poles. We have worked with Union Metal in the past and are hoping that they still have the molds from previous castings of replacement poles. Additionally,

we are researching other sources for replacement poles and also looking into more current pole alloy constructions which have styles as close to the original designs as possible. Our information will be reported to the city in the near future.

Roger Smalley

History of CDC and the White Way Lights

The CDC is once again faced with the rescue and repair of the historic White Way lighting originally installed on Public Square in 1925. Below is a time-line showing CDC's 40 years of effort to preserve these historic street lights.

1969 - The CDC had been the restoration advocate for the architectural integrity of the square for only two years. Ohio Edison claimed that the historic lights were no longer available, beyond repair and would be replaced with cobra head mercury vapor freeway-style lighting.

The *Medina County Gazette* reported on April 1, 1969 that "The CDC arrived at the City Council's Special Legislation meeting ready to protest the new lighting." CDC spokesman Elmer Zarney said that the new lighting would spoil the attractiveness of Public Square. "Medina is a beautiful little town and deserves the best from its citizens and city

government," he declared.

In an article in the *Akron Beacon Journal* on November 4, 1969, Councilman Dale Sigafos said, "People in Medina seem to be willing to pay a little extra money for beauty and aesthetics," as he looked over the petition containing 600 names of people opposed to the modern cobra head style of lighting.

1976 - Once again Ohio Edison proposed replacing the lights, this time with colonial-style fixtures. And once again CDC spearheaded the drive to restore the old lamps. City Hall was jammed with 100 residents eager to support the restoration and to hear Kim Zarney of the CDC speak.

1985 & 1995 - The street lighting issue came up again in '85 and '95. In both cases, the city asked CDC for their input.

Elaine Lamb, Founding member of CDC

Beautification Awards

South Court Street, one of Medina's most historic neighborhoods, is filled with so many architecturally significant and well-preserved homes that CDC has been compelled to bestow its Beautification Awards in two phases. The homes are a veritable catalogue of American architectural styles, ranging from the early Western Reserve farmhouses with barns and remnants of

orchards in the back yard, through various Victorian and early 20th century styles, to the ranch homes of the Eisenhower "Brady Bunch" era.

Phase One of the Beautification Awards has been awarded this spring to 18 properties located from just south of Public Square to Ivy Hill.

Here are some samples:



277 South Court Street. This small Greek Revival home (style popular in the U.S. from 1820-1850) was given some Victorian embellishments in 1880 in the form of a second story porch and Victorian gingerbread trim.

614 South Court Street. Bird supports on the porch posts are a unique feature of this 1880 Victorian home. In 1931 it became the home of the newly married Theodore Foscett, Mayor of Medina. It also boasts a beautiful garden.



524 South Court Street. Built on the site of a much older structure, this 1936 Cottage Revival home belonged to Fred and Freda Snyder, owners of the Medina Farmers' Exchange. Freda was a local philanthropist, most noted for donating the fishpond and fountain that graced the center of Public Square park from 1951 to 1974.



529 South Court Street. This 1837 Federal home (style popular in the U.S. primarily from 1780-1830) was built for Medina merchant, Barney Prentice. The 1848 fire started in his shoe store in the Mechanics' Block in downtown Medina. Now a private home, it was once an antique shop. This home received a CDC Award of Excellence in 2009.



644 South Court Street. This 1878 double-bracketed Italianate Victorian was home to Civil War veteran Judge George Hayden. It was recently restored and received an Award of Excellence in 2008.

Gloria Brown

The Smith Road/Champion Creek Corridor Redevelopment Plan



Significant areas in the heart of Medina are zoned industrial. Both the Medina Supply and James (Bennett) Lumber properties, which are currently for sale, contain industrial lands. Concerns about how these areas might be redeveloped have prompted Medina City Planners to explore alternatives for the future. Two additional properties -- the Methodist Church site, also for sale, and the Medina Farmers' Exchange were included in the study due to their proximity to the other sites.

A Steering Committee, which included three CDC members, was established by the City to work with City Architecture, a planning firm hired through a NOACA grant secured by the city. The committee's primary objective was to "create redevelopment that expands and supports downtown and the surrounding neighborhoods." Through a series of meetings, the Steering Committee clearly established goals that identified

the types of redevelopment most desired for the study area. Also identified were three primary strategies for successful redevelopment: Land use, marketability, and the enhancement of local quality of life components.

The result of the study may be seen in the map below. The master plan would add 39,000 square feet of commercial space, 67 residential units, 0.68 miles of recreational trail and 4.7 acres of parks/green spaces. It would link the uptown area to the southeast corner of the city through a walking and biking trail connection from Roscoe Ewing Park. The possibility of a new municipal court and a boutique hotel are also incorporated as plan options. Full redevelopment will likely take many years but the city is aggressively looking at options regarding the purchase of the available properties. To view the full report, visit www.medinaoh.org, click on Departments then Planning and Zoning and then select Special Plans and Studies from the left menu.

Roger Smalley



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Thank you for your wonderful support!

*Donation and membership information is available at **communitydesigncommittee.org** or call Munson House at **330.725.7516***



Lost...

In 1954 an important piece of Medina history disappeared without a trace...

The American Hotel on the northwest corner of Public Square was torn down to make way for a parking lot for the Savings Deposit Bank (now KeyBank). A hotel had stood on that spot since the 1830's, and the stage coach from Cleveland stopped there regularly to discharge mail, parcels and passengers. It had hosted people from every walk of life, from presidents (William McKinley) to movie stars (Spanky McFarland from Our Gang films) to traveling salesmen.



The American Hotel survived the great 1870 fire because the owner covered the roof with wet blankets. But it did not survive “urban renewal”.

This is what happens when there is no group of concerned citizens like the CDC –passionate about our history and our heritage – to advocate for preservation.

Gloria Brown

Medina
Community
DESIGN
Committee



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